

*Please note, this summer we are re-running reflections from the last cycle B (2018).*

[Seventeenth Sunday in Ordinary Time](#)

12 KGS 4:42-44

PS 145:10-11, 15-16, 17-18

EPH 4:1-6

JN 6:1-15

*By Kevin Ahern, PhD*

The readings for this Sunday have much to say to our contemporary context. In the Gospel we see the miracle of *the Feeding of the Five Thousand*. The importance of this event in the public ministry of Jesus is evident by the fact that it is the only miracle, other than Resurrection, that appears in all four gospels. What is more, the gospels of Matthew and Mark include two separate accounts of a miraculous multiplication, one where Jesus feeds five thousand and another where he feeds four thousand.

Given its significance, what does it mean for us to celebrate a miracle where Christ feeds crowds of hungry women, men, and children?

With this event, there are several reductionistic interpretations that risk robbing it of its prophetic edge. I saw this clearly on a visit to Tabgha, a hilly area on the shores of the Sea of Galilee that is believed to be the site of the miracle. Many of the faithful pilgrims had different accounts and understandings of what is believed to have happened there. For one pilgrim, this was the most difficult miracle for him to believe, even more than Jesus walking on water or rising from the dead!

In some interpretations, the miracle gets explained away and it became a story about sharing. Jesus, as it goes, did not actually do any multiplication; he just inspired the crowds to share what they had, turning the event into a big potluck picnic. Such an interpretation, while sounding nice, quite simply does not square with the text where Philip and Andrew seem anxiously concerned with how they will feed this growing flock. Such interpretations risk downplaying Christ's divinity.

Another temptation goes in a different direction. Instead of downplaying the miraculous dimension, this reading understands the miracle only as a sign of Christ's divinity or a prefiguration of the Eucharistic meal. This risks ignoring the concern that Jesus had for the bodily needs of people around him. At its worst, it, may even overlook Christ's humanity.

Reading the accounts in the four gospels we can see a different reality. Here is a figure who is beginning to attract crowds in this poor region of the world under Roman occupation. By most accounts those who were attracted to Jesus were poor, very likely malnourished by today's standards, with little to share. Some would have traveled far, by foot to see Jesus. And there were no Pizza Huts (as there is today in nearby Magdala) that could deliver deep dish pies.

In many ways, this is a simple miracle, Jesus sees that the people are hungry and he feeds them. Jesus, as Pope Francis frequently reminds us, is not indifferent to the reality of those who are suffering in anyway. This seemingly simple miracle speaks to a deeper reality about the nature of God: God cares. God cares not just for our spiritual well-being but also for our physical and social well-being.

We see the same message in both the first reading and in the responsorial psalm included in today's lectionary. In the reading from the *Book of Kings*, the Lord God shows concern for those who are hungry in the community, as Elisha instructs that food be redistributed to the people to eat. We don't see it in this reading today, but if we go back a few verses in the text, we discover this is a period of famine (2 KGS 4:38).

The response for the psalm directly speaks to God's concern for our whole selves as it proclaims: "The hand of the Lord feeds us; he answers all our needs". God is concerned with *all our needs*, not just our spiritual ones. As such, we as followers of the incarnate God must also care for all the realities of people around us, especially those who are hungry, thirsty, and marginalized. Like the boy in the Gospel with the few fish and loaves, we are called to participate with God as share what we have been given. If we truly accept our baptismal vocations, then we must as Paul instructs in the second reading, witness to that great gift with humility gentleness, patience and love.

This insight is at the heart of what the Catholic social tradition calls integral human development. In our public policies, economic decisions and civic engagement, we are called to consider the *development of all people and the whole person*. In other words, as church, we have a holistic mission to care for the multifaceted dimensions of what it means to be human, including their physical, social, and spiritual needs.

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